Emotional Labour and Archival Practice - Reflection

by Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart

Abstract

This reflection piece is based on the talk given by the authors at the Society of North Carolina Archivists (SNCA) conference in March 2018. They spoke on the topic of emotional labour and archival practice, discussing the effects that exposure to records with potentially traumatising content can have on those working with archival materials. Below they discuss the content of the presentation and reflect on the feedback and responses they received at the time.

To begin, we would like to acknowledge those with the lived experience of out-of-home "care," whom we will refer to collectively as Care Leavers during this article but acknowledge that this terminology is disputed. During our presentation we included an image of the Victorian memorial to Forgotten Australians, which was installed in the city of Melbourne, Australia on 25 October 2010.[1] The inscription reads as follows:

> Here we remember those thousands of children who were separated from their families and grew up or spent time in Victorian orphanages, children's homes and foster homes last century. Many were frightened, abused and neglected. We acknowledge the many shattered lives and the courage and strength of those who survived.

Nothing we discuss tries to lessen those experiences. Instead it also acknowledges the effect that material contained within some records can have, not solely upon a person accessing the records, but also for the archivists and recordkeepers who have processed them and are making them available for use.

As a result of our backgrounds we saw the need to raise the topics of vicarious trauma and emotional labor for the first time in a professional forum at the Australian Society of Archivists conference in 2017.[2] Following our presentation we created a safer space by turning off all recording devices and asking people to refrain from tweeting, enabling

13

room for a significant and important discussion with our peers on the topic. What became clear was the need for vicarious trauma to be discussed and responded to within the archival profession more broadly.

When we saw that the theme of the SNCA conference, "Navigating the Web of Community: Archivists and the Ethics of Care" so closely aligned with our topic, we knew we had to attend and participate in the discussion happening outside of Australia.[3]

Vicarious trauma

To position ourselves, we are not experts in vicarious trauma, so will not go into this in great detail, instead preferring to share resources on the topic from experts for further reading.[4] The comprehensive definition we use to describe vicarious trauma comes from the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) Final Report*[5] which states:

> *Vicarious trauma describes the internal changes that can occur for a worker who is engaged with survivors of trauma and their trauma material. A person does not have to experience the trauma directly themselves, but could be exposed through contact with survivors of abuse, written material with trauma content or hearing stories of abuse. The cumulative effects of this exposure need to be acknowledged, identified and managed. The impacts can mirror those of the person who experienced the trauma, including sleep disturbance, intrusive and distressing memories and sensory experiences.*[6]

Supporting staff of RCIRCSA

This topic was mentioned by the RCIRCSA in the context of its "Well at Work" program, which it described in detail over five pages in the *Final Report*. The RCIRCSA acknowledged the challenging environment its staff worked in and the need to support its employees. The *RCIRCSA Final Report* states:

> *In an attempt to mitigate this risk [of vicarious trauma], we developed a comprehensive staff support framework, called Well at Work, that helped staff to*

build resilience and recognise the early signs of vicarious trauma, and provided appropriate strategies and activities to manage wellbeing.[7]

The RCIRCSA described it as their duty of care to provide support for the wellbeing of their staff. They completed wellbeing checks, and in-house peer to peer support and debriefing. Staff training on vicarious trauma and resilience and other wellbeing activities were available to staff, who could pick and choose what would support their individual needs and preferences. The RCIRCSA also understood a need to create a positive work culture, recognising that high workloads and the level of exposure staff had to traumatic material and stories would impact people's ability to continue to be well at work.

Archivists missing support

Unfortunately, what became clear from our session in Australia was that this wellbeing programme had not flowed down to the agencies responding to the RCIRCSA . Archivists all over Australia-- in government, religious, and other institutions--had worked directly with the records recording child sexual abuse for years but had received no support. The privacy and confidentiality of archival work often means that we are unable to discuss any details of our work and this really highlighted the need for the archival community to come together around this topic and support each other.

Community of care

Any person potentially affected by vicarious trauma, could and should be part of a community of care that can provide peer to peer support. This community of care was brought to life in the organisers, keynotes and fellow presenters at the SNCA conference[8] and extended the concept of an archivist to archivist relationship. This fifth principle was proposed at the 2017 SAA panel on Radical Empathy[9] to add to Caswell and Cifor's four affective responsibilities in their much-discussed paper *From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,* and is a concept we wholeheartedly support.[10]

We believe anyone and everyone who comes into contact with the records should be included in the discussion,

whether they are archivists or not, permanent or casual, paid or unpaid, accessing the records as a researcher or as the subject of the record. They are all our peers. The article *Volunteers in Australian Archives* called for volunteers to be included in future discussions on the topic of vicarious trauma because due to "the serendipitous nature of archival collections, archival organisations cannot predict what material will affect whom, nor the level of impact the material will have."[11] Many marginalised communities and advocacy groups use the phrase: "nothing about us without us"[12] and we believe this discussion needs to embody this. Because there is also a need to think about how guests, researchers, and donors might react to potentially traumatising content, there should be processes in place to assist staff in how to respond when such a situation arises.

Many acknowledge that experiences in the archives can be both positive and negative. Julia Mant, President of the Australian Society of Archivists, described archives as "full of emotions."[13] We should not be trying to predict what people will feel and when they might need the support, it should be embedded within our workflow and practices, but in place of that, we can create communities of care and support to provide peer, colleague, and friend support. Anyone who comes into contact with the archives or the people affected by them becomes part of the community of care.

Radical Empathy and Trauma Informed Archival Practice

We turn now to the concept of radical empathy described by Caswell and Cifor as "a willingness to be affected, to be shaped by another's experience, without blurring the lines between the self and the other" and how radical empathy can and should impact archival practice.[14] This section will briefly discuss examples of potential places in archival practice where radical empathy can be enacted using the notion of trauma-informed [archival] practice.[15]

"Records and recordkeeping processes are not glamorous. They are, however, powerful and have consequences in both their presence and their absence."[16] This quote by Anne Gilliland correlates with sentiments in the RCIRCSA Final Report which acknowledged the power of absent records, recognising the challenge it created for the Commission's work, and the ability of people to access justice. In our

Australian discussion, archivists spoke about how the effects of vicarious trauma were compounded by the absence of records, leaving them feeling powerless to help in the face of silence in the records.

If we act on this opportunity for radical empathy and achieving trauma-informed archival practice, this challenge could be a chance to put the community first, to find out how we could support them, and in turn leave the archivist feeling more supported. This is a moment to provide more transparent archival description, using evidence to show records did exist, describing what is known to have existed, and explaining why they were destroyed to fill a gap for the community.[17]

Another example of extending radical empathy in the archives and making trauma-informed decisions is switching from basing decision-making processes on what is best for the archive and instead getting to know the community you're trying to represent. Working together with an under- or misrepresented community to learn what is lacking and then using that knowledge to inform appraisal, access, description, and digitisation decisions could be much more effective to fill the silences in our collections. This was a strong theme throughout the SNCA conference and there were countless presentations which discussed projects that embodied this work, which was heartening to see.[18]

Trauma-informed archival practice should also impact our physical space. For example, only allowing pencils and barring phones, bags or photos is daunting and requiring sign-ups is challenging for those with limited access to ID. There are also physical barriers to reading rooms, with a lack of privacy and comfort often limiting the ability for people to explore the records at their own pace. Archives and collections can also be physically inaccessible for disabled people, due to factors such as buildings not in compliance with disability regulations, unavailability of screen readers, and desks and counters at inaccessible heights for wheelchair users. Finally, we also need to think about our archives' presence in the digital realm, because evidence shows that broken links can have the power to re-traumatise people.[19]

The opening session of the SNCA conference, presented by Naomi Nelson, really set the tone, calling for us to bring our full selves to our work, to empathise, to question our physical places (reading rooms), and to understand the

importance of context. If we do all that, we are most definite-
ly enacting radical empathy and bringing trauma-informed
archival practice to life.

This is only just scratching the surface of how we
can incorporate trauma-informed archival practice into our
workplaces to improve our practices and processes, to en-
hance access, diversify our collections, and start to put com-
munities first when we make decisions about collections that
are about them, impact them, or in any way represent them.
People with the lived experience are always experts-- you
can join them and provide support by bringing archival ex-
pertise.

Vicarious empathisation

The concept of vicarious empathisation, or resili-
ence, is developed from the understanding that exposure to
the stories of others develops deeper empathy and under-
standing. This is not new to psychologists who have been
studying the effect of trauma, and who understand that fol-
lowing trauma, a person may not always be negatively im-
pacted but instead can grow. This is also referred to as post-
traumatic growth, where it is understood people can have
increased empathy, insight, tolerance, and compassion as a
result of their experience.

Discussed together, vicarious trauma and vicarious
resilience can inform a more holistic approach to archival
practice. While briefly touched on here, there is scope for
further examination of how these can influence archival
practices such as appraisal, description, and release deci-
sions. We also hope that somewhere in this conversation,
spaces will be created that allow us opportunities to partici-
pate in restorative justice processes.

We believe there is a need for safer spaces and net-
works to share experiences among peers. There is often stig-
ma around emotions in archives: people have been told to
just get over it, or to deal with it, or that it isn't for them to
feel upset because the records aren't about them, because that
is what people have traditionally had to do. Instead, we want
to challenge that understanding and argue that organisations
should support their employees and volunteers when dealing
with potentially traumatic material. As discussed, this new
understanding of radical empathy can in turn improve ar-
chives' ability to provide a better, more responsive service to

communities. There will always be a difference in support for lone arrangers versus archivists in large institutions and our obligations around privacy and non-disclosure can act as a barrier, so this is where we need support from each other and to support each other.

Nicola Laurent is a Project Archivist on the Find & Connect web resource. The web resource is part of a larger suite of services offered by the Australian Federal Government to support people who spent time in out-of-home 'care' as a child in the twentieth century. The web resource provides information about out-of-home 'care' in Australia, linking together the histories of institutions who provided 'care' with the archival records created by those institutions and provides information about how the records can be accessed. Nicola was first introduced to the concepts of vicarious trauma and trauma-informed practice during a workshop organised for staff wellbeing.

Michaela Hart is a Senior Archivist at the Department of Health and Human Services in Melbourne, Australia. She was responsible for researching the department's response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse. Her background in nursing and community development informed what her expectations were around workplace support during this time and gave her the skills to identify and articulate her needs. These also made her realise there was a gap in dialogue around this issue in the archival profession and motivated this response.

NOTES

1. Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA), "Monuments," Alliance for Forgotten Australians, 2017, https://forgottenaustralians.org.au/about/monuments (accessed March 5, 2018).
2. Michaela Hart and Nicola Laurent, "Session 4B ‐ Addressing Separation Loss & Trauma," AusArchivists – TV, 2017, https://youtu.be/RWZNGrxGs44 (accessed August 28, 2018).
3. We would like to thank the SNCA committee, especially Kelly Wooten for your generous help to make that hap-

pen.

4. Blue Knot Foundation Workers & Practitioners, "Vicarious traumatisation," Blue Knot Foundation, https://www.blueknot.org.au/Workers-Practitioners/ For-Health-Professionals/Resources-for-Health-Professionals/Vicarious-Traumatisation (accessed September 15, 2017); Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Workshops, "Vicarious Trauma – Strategies for Resilience," Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute, 2018, https://ca.ctrinstitute.com/workshops/category/public-workshops/vicarious-trauma-strategies-for-resilience/ (accessed August 31, 2018); Shekinah Manning-Jones, Ian de Terte and Christine Stephens, "Secondary traumatic stress, vicarious posttraumatic growth, and coping among health professionals; A comparison study," New Zealand Journal of Psychology 45, no. 1 (April 2016): 20-29, http://www.psychology.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/Secondary-Traumatic-Stress.pdf; Rob Gordon, "Thirty Years of Trauma Work: Clarifying and Broadening the Consequences of Trauma," Psychotherapy in Australia 13, no. 3 (May 2007): 12-19, http://www.psychotherapy.com.au/fileadmin/site_files/ pdfs/Gordon.pdf; Clyde Wanett, "The (Unexpected) emotional impact of archiving," WITNESS blog, (2015), https://archiving.witness.org/2015/08/the-unexpected-emotional-impact-of-archiving/ (accessed March 12, 2018); Queensland Government Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women, Child Safety Practice Manual - 5. Implement strategies to manage stress, vicarious trauma and critical incident stress, 2017, https://www.csyw.qld.gov.au/childsafety/child-safety-practice-manual/chapters/10-general/10-11-staff-safety -well-being/key-steps/5-implement-strategies-manage-stress-vicarious-trauma-critical-incident-stress.

5. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Final Report, 2017, https:// www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report.

6. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Final Report – Volume 1, Our Inquiry, 2017: 272, https:// www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/ files/final_report_-_volume_1_our_inquiry.pdf.

7. Ibid., 57.

8. Originally proposed in the presentation Radical Empathy in Archival Practice at the 2017 Society of American Archivists meeting (https://archives2017.sched.com/event/ABGy/301-radical-empathy-in-archival-practice), this work has continued to be actioned on the Radical Empathy in Archival Practice tumblr (https://radical-empathy.tumblr.com/) and was evident in the SNCA Conference programme by organiser, Kelly Wooten, most memorably in the keynote by Holly A. Smith, the introduction by Libby Coyner and in the Conference welcome, among many other presentations.

9. Wooten, Kelly. 2017. "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice." Radical Empathy in Archival Practice tumblr. July. https://radical-empathy.tumblr.com/post/172280638489/we-updated-our-mini-zine-for-the-new-england.

10. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," Archivaria 81 (Spring 2016): 23-43, https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557.

11. Annelie de Villiers, Nicola Laurent and Christopher Stueven, "Volunteers in Australian archives," Archives and Manuscripts 45, no. 2 (2017): 118-135, https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2017.1326828.

12. The saying "nothing about us without us" in English first emerged in the disability movement of the early 1990s, but has since been used by other marginalised communities, including Care Leavers, see example Frank Golding, Nothing about us without us, 2015, http://frankgolding.com/nothing-about-us-without-us/.

13. Quote by Julia Mant made during the question time of the 2017 Jean Whyte Memorial Lecture on the topic Affect in the Archive: trauma, grief, and text, some personal reflections.

14. Caswell and Cifor, From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives, 31 and for more examples see: Radical Empathy in Archival Practice tumblr.

15. "Trauma-informed practice is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and

that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment." For more information see: Blue Knot Foundation Workers & Practitioners, "Trauma-informed Care and Practice," Blue Knot Foundation, https://www.blueknot.org.au/ Workers-Practitioners/For-Health-Professionals/ Resources-for-Health-Professionals/Trauma-Informed-Care (accessed September 5, 2018).

16. Anne J. Gilliland, "Moving Past: Probing the Agency and Affect of Recordkeeping in Individual and Community Lives in Post-conflict Croatia," Archival Science 14, nos.3-4 (2014): 251.
17. Topic discussed in a conference presentation by Dr Cate O'Neill and Nicola Laurent on Convenient Fires and Floods at the International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA 8), Melbourne, 29 May 2018.
18. Some examples include: Jessica Janecki on "Women's Work: Highlighting Women's Contributions in the Lisa Unger Baskin Collection," Anna St. Onge on "It's Not Supposed to be Comfortable: Affective Responsibilities of Archivists Following the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)," Erin Lawrimore, Kathelene Smith, Scott Hinshaw and Stacey Krim on the "Ethics of Care and the University Archives: Engaging Communities and Opening the Archives," Holly A. Smith on "Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy," and John B. Gartrell, Patrick Stawski and Megan Lewis on "When Archivists and Activists meet: A Conversation on Engaging with Activist Communities."
19. Nicola Laurent, "Broken links, broken trust," Find & Connect web resource, 2016, http://www.findandconnectwrblog.info/2016/11/broken-links-broken-trust/ (accessed March 5, 2018).